

“Theodicies, Adams, and the Recognition of Goodness”
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1.0 Introduction

Most of my written work has focused on those loveable 17th century rationalists, Descartes, Spinoza, Malebranche, and Leibniz. Whatever else we may think of their work, this motley crew has a decidedly mixed reputation when it comes to the problem of evil. On the one hand, the late seventeenth century is often portrayed as a kind of theodical Golden Age during which speculative metaphysics and post-Scholastic theology were given free reign to produce bold and novel explanations for the existence, kinds, amounts, and distributions of evil in a world created by an omni-benevolent, omniscient, and omnipotent God. But, it is often noted, such theodical free-for-alls occurred in a kind of naïve vacuum involving conditions which philosophers of religion today can no longer expect. Ah, the good ole’ days of the 1600s, when one could take seriously the notion that ours was the best of all possible worlds, blissfully unaware of the gathering critical storm-clouds on the historical horizon: Voltaire, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Freud, et al. A consequence of such innocence, we’re told, is that these older theodicies fail to answer or even address the tougher problems of evil that we contemporary theists now face. Even worse, the explanations that early moderns *do* advance suggest that they are also ignorant of either some real, hard data about suffering and evil, or else of moral principles that render their explanations utterly inept, if not morally offensive, when applied to such data. And so, assuming we haven’t abandoned theism entirely by this late date, we’d better either hunker down in our defensive postures

and try to salvage the tattered vestiges of their grand-scale theodicies to defeat arguments from evil without pretending to take *as actually true* their claims, or simply look elsewhere entirely for resources to handle the problems of evil.

I don't believe most of that, of course. I think, for instance, that much of the originality of 17th century theodicies lies in what is left off from earlier accounts, such as privation theory, rather than in what they tack on.¹ Nor were these theodicians unaware of scathing challenges to their endeavors; Bayle (among others) made certain of that.² And to suggest without a lot of further argument that 17th century philosophers of religion were unacquainted with the devastating effects of, say, large-scale, institutionally sanctioned and executed horrors would be to neglect events like the Thirty Years War and the Spanish persecution and expulsion of its Jewish citizenry.³

But I won't try to defend any of that in this talk. Instead, I want to focus on the charge these rationalists – or anyone offering theodicies in their style – fail to adequately explain God's goodness in the face of certain kinds or instances of evil. I'll sharpen the objection below, but at the outset, I want to be clear that my interest here is a meta-theodicy one. I won't be defending Descartes' free will theodicy, or Spinoza's plenitude theodicy, or Malebranche's natural regularity theodicy, or Leibniz's best-of-all-possible worlds theodicy. Rather, I'll be defending against the charge that *even if the explanations are correct*, such theodicies nevertheless fail to adequately account for God's goodness. So the charge I'm focusing on isn't that their accounts are *wrong* so much as that they are *misguided* or *inadequate*. I think the best version of this objection is found in the work of Marilyn McCord Adams. I'll argue in reply that even if we accept Adams' criterion of explanatory adequacy, these traditional theodicies *can* adequately explain the goodness of

God in the face of what she calls “horrendous evils” (section 3.1). I’ll then question whether her criterion of adequacy is correct in the first place (section 3.2 and 3.3). [Note: throughout this talk, I’ll continue to use the term “theodicy” in a loose sense, such that attempts to *explain* the goodness of God in the face of evils, without trying to *justify* the ways of God, also count as theodicies.⁴]

But before turning to Adams, I should note that this charge against traditional theodicies – namely, that their explanations as to why God in fact created and sustains our world must fall silent, inert, when confronted with certain magnitudes or kinds of evil, such as the world-engulfing atrocities of the 20th century – is not new. Indeed, there exists a veritable cottage industry devoted to critiquing the practice of developing theodicies, each iteration outdoing the previous in describing just how bad it is to pursue such projects. Levinas, on the early side of this movement, now sounds positively mild in his declaration that “The disproportion between suffering and every theodicy was shown at Auschwitz with a glaring, obvious clarity.”⁵ Compare that to Terrence Tilley’s jarring conclusion that “engaging in the discourse practice of theodicies *creates* evil.”⁶ The general charge of inadequacy and inappropriateness shows little signs of slowing. In his just published book *Violence*, Slavoj Žižek asks, “When confronted with an event like the Holocaust or the death of millions in the Congo over these last years, is it not *obscene* to claim that these stains have a deeper meaning through which they contribute to the harmony of the whole?”⁷ I take it that the answer is supposed to be “yes,” but Žižek’s slide to a rhetorical question raises a concern about such charges: they are often advanced in the absence of actual (or at least explicit) *argumentation* for their conclusion. And since those of us willing to countenance and discuss greater harmony strategies are here

being charged with uttering obscenities or worse, it seems fair to ask for reasons supporting such a charge.

A lack of rigorous argumentation for conclusions is not, however, a vice of Adams' work. With admirable sensitivity to the phenomena being discussed, Adams lays out a strong case for the inadequacies of traditional theodical explanations of God's goodness in the face of certain forms of human suffering. Her case, if correct, would cover not only bygone 17th century theodicies, but also the still much-beloved free will theodicy (and its younger cousin, the free will defense). She also, I should note, makes her charges in a lively manner without resorting to incendiary rhetoric, and the forceful upshots of her conclusions are no less powerful for their respectful and civil tone.⁸ There is much, I think, that is correct and important in her work on the problem of evil, but since agreement makes for lousy discussion, I will focus on some of the claims that I find unconvincing.

2.0 Adams on Horrendous Evil, Theodicies, and the Recognition of Goodness

Adams has written a pair of books and a series of articles on the problem of evil; I won't pretend to do justice to the richness of her discussion here. In fact, I'm going to mostly ignore the positive side of her proposal and focus on her charge of inadequacy against previous theodicies. But first, I will summarize the minimal material needed to get her concern up and running, which may also serve as a refresher for those in the room who aren't committed Adamsians like me.

Adams' work on the problem of evil centers on horrendous evils, a category of evils she defines as "evils, the participation in which (that is, the doing or suffering of which) constitutes prima facie reason to doubt whether the participant's life could (given

their inclusion in it) be a great good to him/her on the whole.”⁹ She cites as paradigmatic examples, “the rape of a woman and axing off of her arms, psycho-physical torture whose ultimate goal is the disintegration of the personality, betrayal of one’s deepest loyalties, child abuse...child pornography, parental incest, slow death by starvation, the explosion of nuclear bombs over populated areas.”¹⁰

Adams points out that persons in our world are deeply vulnerable to horrors, independent of their moral standing (at least relative to other created persons) and their abilities; horrors rain down on the just and unjust alike, and a life free from horrors cannot be guaranteed by the powers of any person, try as they might.¹¹ Adams argues that our vulnerability to horrors does not stem from what we or our ancestors have done; it is a function of what we are. Ontology and biology – realms beyond our responsibility and control – are the deepest sources of our susceptibility to horrors and hence the responsibility for such vulnerability must lie elsewhere than creaturely misconduct. Of course, created persons can bear some moral responsibility for actually bringing about horrors, but even where there is a clear, guilty perpetrator, familiar moral evaluations will be incomplete. For, Adams argues, the suffering of horrors far outstrips any possible comprehension, and hence any possible intent, by their perpetrator.¹² If so, responsibility for both vulnerability to and the actual suffering of horrors shifts away from creaturely agents, even though there remains a morally salient distinction between the Nazi soldier and the Auschwitz prisoner. Hence the familiar attempt to attribute the responsibility for such evils to culpable misuses of freedom by creatures – local perpetrators for the actual occurrence and ancestral perpetrators for post-Eden vulnerabilities – fail. Horrendous evils reveal gaping distances – between God and child-like vulnerable creatures and

between creaturely intent and outcome – that diminishes the significance and robustness of creaturely autonomy in horrors. I won't summarize her arguments for all this, but I will state for the record that I agree with most of Adams's conclusions here, including her dissatisfaction with free will approaches to the problem of horrendous evil.

But it isn't just appeals to freedom that stumble in the face of horrors, according to Adams. *Any* attempt to explain God's goodness in sustaining a horror-strewn world by appeal to what Adams calls "global goods" will be inadequate. Adams doesn't explicitly define global goods, but I take it that global goods are the sorts of goods whose goodness accrues most immediately to the world as a whole.¹³ Familiar examples of such global goods would include the best feasible ratio of moral good over moral evil brought about by free creatures; or diversity that is perfectly harmonized with unity, or simple, regular, and elegant natural laws that best reflect the wisdom of their creator, or of a plentiful continuum of creatures that best reflects the fecund power of their source. Adams charges that whatever be the goodness accrued to worlds possessing such global goods, appealing to them cannot adequately explain the goodness of God in a world containing horrendous evils. Why not?

Adams gives (at least) two reasons for the impotence of global goods to defeat horrendous evils, though I'm reconstructing a bit here. First, global goods are not appropriately agent-centered. They hit the wrong target for horrendous evils, since horrendous evils are, by definition, agent-centered. Maybe it is better *for the world* to contain horrible black splotches than not; it certainly doesn't seem to be better *for me* to be the world-enhancing splotch than not to be at all. "Divine love for created persons would mean that God does not have merely global goods...and/or does not pursue them

at the cost of not being good-to the individual created persons God makes.”¹⁴ Even if a theist proves that God creates a world teeming with great global goods, that alone would not guarantee that God is good to each individual person in the world. For the instantiation of global goods in a world seems consistent with the existence of individuals for whom it would have been better *for them* never to have been born at all, even in cases in which their existence contributes to the realization of such goods. Since horrendous evils constitute *prima facie* reasons for participants to doubt whether their life is a great good *to them*, appeals to global goods as the basis for defeating horrendous evils appear inept.

Or worse, as Ivan Karamazov pondered: “Is it possible that I’ve suffered so that I, together with my evil deeds and suffering, should be manure for someone’s future harmony?”¹⁵ (Note: replying that, no, Ivan, your suffering is actually manure for *the world as a whole’s* future harmony seems to make matters worse.) Adams is sympathetic with Karamazov’s concern: “My claim is that *Divine love would not subject some individual created persons to horrors simply for the benefit of others or to enhance cosmic excellence.*”¹⁶ So, the apparent willingness of global goods theodicies to sacrifice great agent-centered goods, such as having a life worth living on the whole, for the sake of realizing global goods, also calls into question the individual focus and universal extent of God’s love that Adams assumes (and which I too will assume in this talk).

Adams’ second complaint about global goods is that they aren’t agent-centered *in the right way*. The problem here isn’t simply that global goods don’t trickle down to become goods for every individual person, but that even if they did, global goods can’t be

appropriately integrated into the lives of horror participants in ways that successfully defeat horrendous evils. This one takes a bit more unpacking.¹⁷

Recall that horrendous evils constitute *prima facie* reasons for participants to doubt whether their lives are a great good to them on the whole. Adams thinks that to defeat such *prima facie* reasons, God needs to be good to individuals in such a way that their participation in horrors is “organically integrated” into the “context of their own lives.”¹⁸ According to Adams, a necessary condition of such personal integration is a recognition requirement on God’s goodness to persons: God must be good to horror participants in such a way that they come to recognize some of the greater goods that their horror participation occasions for them, including post-mortem, transcendent goods. (Indeed, providing the opportunity for such recognition and appropriation of greater goods would be one important way in which God is good to individuals.) The thought seems to be that, in order to defeat the belief that my life has not been a great good for me, I must come to recognize some greater goods in my life that, in fact make my life a great good for me.¹⁹

Adams summarizes her recognition requirement this way: “I assume that for an individual’s life to be a great good *to him/her* on the whole, it is not enough for good to balance off or defeat evil *objectively speaking*. The individual involved must him/herself also recognize and appropriate at least some of those positive meanings.”²⁰ She often emphasizes the cognitive component of this condition: “We may thus distinguish between *objective* and *recognized* meaning, so that relation to some great enough good might objectively defeat evil within the context of an individual’s life without *their knowing* about those connections,”²¹ but she sometimes expands it to include other

attitudes like *valuing* and *enjoying*: “My notion is that for a person’s life to be a great good to him/her on the whole, the external point of view (even if it is God’s) is not sufficient. Rather, the person him/herself must value, and actually enjoy, his/her relations to enough goods and to goods that are great enough.”²²

If so, God’s defeat of horrendous evils requires the provision of agent-centered greater goods that are recognized and appropriated by participants as outweighing the evils that occasion their realization. I will call this requirement the *Recognition of Goodness Condition*, or RG:

A horrendous evil, *HE*, is successfully defeated only if for every participant *p* in *HE*, *p* recognizes, values, and enjoys at least some of the goods that (i.) are good-for *p*; (ii.) balance-off the evil of *HE*; and (iii.) *p* accrues in virtue of *p*’s participation in *HE*.²³

Adams argues that solving the problems that horrendous evils pose for theism requires showing how every horrendous evil could be defeated in accordance with RG.²⁴ Adams then contends that global goods, even if exemplified in our world, cannot adequately satisfy RG, and hence theodicies relying solely on global goods will fail to solve one of the toughest problems of evil. (From here on, when I refer to “horror defeat” *simpliciter*, I mean to imply at least the satisfaction of RG.)

3.0 Three Challenges to RG

If Adams is correct, the demands on a successful theodicy are quite high. High in content: not only must theodicians explain how the goodness of God is consistent with the existence, kinds, and distributions of evil in the world, but, at least in cases of horrors, successful theodicies must also show how the relevant greater goods could fulfill RG.²⁵ The demands are also high in *scope*: defeating a horrendous evil requires defeating it for every participant in it (victims and perpetrators alike) and solving the problem of

horrendous evil requires universal horror-defeat.²⁶ The *force* of her demand is lower than traditional theodicies: she thinks one need only describe a logically possible scenario in which all horrendous evils are defeated to be successful in solving the problem horrors pose.²⁷ But that low force makes her charge of inadequacy against those traditional theodicies quite high: they can't even show how God could possibly defeat horrendous evils! As I mentioned earlier, I am going to set aside Adams' own attempt to solve the problem of horrendous evils. My focus will be on whether we should accept RG, and if we do, whether global goods must fail to satisfy it.

Towards that end, I will raise three sorts of challenges for Adams. The first accepts RG, but argues that at least some global goods theodicies can satisfy it. In the second, I ask whether there are overriding reasons for the failure of universal horror-defeat that are consistent with God's nature, actions, and promises to date. I consider four such possible reasons; if any stick, RG will fail to state a necessary condition for solving the problem of horrendous evils, though a more modest version of it may still apply in the absence of those reasons. The third, most sweeping challenge questions whether anything like RG is true at all.

3.1 Reply One: Global goods can satisfy RG

Let's begin with Adams' concern about agent-centeredness, the objective counterpart to clause (i.) of RG. While it is true that the goodness of global goods, like a well-ordered Malebranchian universe with simple laws, accrues most immediately to the world as a whole, it is also seems clear that the individuals in such worlds will benefit from some world-enhancing goods. Surely it is a great good *for rational agents* to live in a regulated world in which induction works.²⁸ I noted Adams' claim that "*Divine love*

would not subject some individual created persons to horrors simply for the benefit of others or to enhance cosmic excellence.” Traditional theodicies would agree, but would (plausibly) deny that their global goods are brought about by God *only* for the benefit of the world as a whole. Even the most consequentialist-sounding appeals to global goods, such as those found in Leibniz’s theodicies, contain side arguments that excellent-making global features yield goods for the creatures in globally good worlds.²⁹ A minimal agent-centered good that is instantiated in virtue of the instantiation of great global goods and is common to all global goods theodicies is the great good of being a part of a globally great world. Membership has its privileges, as wise marketing sages used to say.

At the very least, it is possible for global-centered goods to also provide derivative goods that are agent-centered, and producing such derivative goods could be part of God’s motives in world-selection. To insist in reply that God also produce goods that are *only* agent-centered strikes me as too high a demand, at least assuming God could get enough derivative goodness from global goods to be sufficiently good for individuals (an assumption that concerns clause (ii.), not clause (i.)). A compelling rationalist thought here is that God’s excellence in creation is actually magnified by the instantiation of single goods that can do double-duty, being both good for the whole and derivatively good for the parts. Mix-matches between good-for the world and good-for the individual parts seem possible and would, *ceteris paribus*, diminish the excellence of such a world. Shouldn’t the elegant alignment of global goods with creaturely needs count as a good-making feature of ours?

So I do not see why global goods cannot be agent-centered, *even if* only in the very minimal sense that being a part of a good overall whole can and is also a great good

for individuals. We might worry that the second clause of RG provides a greater difficulty for global goods appeals. After all, won't goods like "being a member of a well-regulated universe" be dwarfed by the evils of horrific suffering that such membership may occasion? Well, it would be dialectically unsatisfying to simply assert that no global good could *objectively* outweigh the evil of horrors. Ignoring all the other conditions, why *couldn't* the good of membership in a diverse cosmos outweigh the evil for some persons who are vulnerable, and even fall prey, to egregious suffering? I don't have a sufficiently well-calibrated scale of moral intuition on which to decide this question, but it has seemed to at least some – namely the classical theodicians we're discussing - that global goods can and do have such over-balancing excellences. But since Adams' charge is that no global good *could* satisfy (ii.), we need more than just an appeal to alternative storehouses of intuitions to show that the judgments of Leibniz et al. really express impossibilities. Surely we ought to begrudge the judgments of 17th century rationalists at least a *prima facie* presumption of possibility!

The more direct challenge from (ii.) lies in the recognition dimension: even if a global good does, in fact, outweigh the evil of the horror, why think that each participant will be able to recognize, value, and enjoy this balancing off? Let us begin with a weaker version: can we imagine persons who, upon learning of the link between their suffering and the overall excellence of the world, come to recognize that, say, cosmic diversity outweighs the evils of their horrors? In principle, I do not see why not, at least assuming some cognitive abilities that Adams's own preferred solution requires.³⁰ Why couldn't God educate post-mortem persons to see how their sufferings were outweighed by the greatness of some greater good, if they in fact were? Imagine the beatific vision involves

God handing out (Divinely edited) copies of the *Theodicy* and telling us that the global goods identified by Leibniz are in fact the ones that explain our suffering and that those goods far outweigh the evils of the suffering. Suppose also that I have come to trust and love God in ways that prompt me to enjoy and value the goods that God enjoys and trust God's revelations about those goods. (As we'll see in the next section, Adams believes such educational "coaching" by God is consistent with RG.) Wouldn't that show how clause (ii.) could be satisfied for me with respect to such global goods?

That *every* horror participant could come to satisfy (ii.) with respect to global goods may seem more difficult, especially given the pre-mortem testimony of some people who clearly *don't* recognize the outweighing goodness of global goods.³¹ In the next section, we'll look at reasons that such recognition may sometimes fail. But whatever the reasons for doubting that *all* participants could recognize and value the overbalancing of a global good, they will not involve anything about the global good *per se*. Take a good that Adams favors, such as a deeper identification with the crucified God.³² Perhaps some participants will recognize, value, and enjoy that *this* good outweighs the evil in their lives, and perhaps more will with some Divine prompting and healing. But it seems no more or less plausible to think that *all* participants will come to such a state with respect to Adams' good than that *all* will recognize and enjoy the overbalancing of some global good. So if there are concerns about the universal satisfaction of (ii.), I do not see how they will turn on the differences between a global and a non-global good.

I suspect Adams' deepest concern lies with the objective counter-part to (iii.). For global goods may seem to be, in a sense, too coarse-grained to bear the crushing weight

of horrors. I mentioned that some of the goodness of, say, an elegantly law-governed cosmos, will accrue to the inhabitants of such a regularity-rich world. But its goodness seems to accrue generically to all individuals in virtue of their membership in such a world. Participants and non-participants in horrors alike enjoy many of the blessings of existing in such a world; horror participants don't seem to acquire them in virtue of their horrors, pace (iii.)

In reply, most classical theodicians would deny that the instantiation of great global goods is so independent of the instantiation of the particular, even horrific, evils of the parts. Leibniz famously pushes this dependence to a metaphysical extreme, arguing for a kind of mereological essentialism about the good-makers of the best possible world: were an individual to suffer even slightly less than they in fact do, none of us would exist, nor would the then actual world be the best possible. But even apart from such extremes, global goods theodicians will often insist that at least the possibility of even the most evil parts is a necessary condition for the realization of the global good. What (iii.) is supposed to prevent is horrific suffering being readily detachable from the greater overbalancing goods. But I'm not aware of a traditional theodicy in which the instantiation of global goods is so insensitive to the fine-grained instances of particular evils; the connection between the particular horror and the greater global good is precisely what is playing the theodical role, after all.³³

Adams could reply by strengthening (iii.) to something like (iii*.): "*p* accrues *only* in virtue of HE." I grant that *this* would be false for most global goods.³⁴ But it also seems false for many of the goods Adams favors, such as intimacy with the crucified God. If, in further reply, Adams were to insist that her preferred goods – perhaps a

special kind of intimacy with Christ - *are* obtained only in virtue of horrendous evil participation, then we should reject (iii*) outright. For in showing how (iii*) could be satisfied by incredibly great, transcendent, horror-defeating goods, Adams will explain too much. For, in addition to showing how it is better for horror participants to have existed rather than not, she may also readily show that it is better for persons to participate in horrors than not, a conclusion with some very troubling motivational upshots, to say the least.

And so I can agree with Adams that there are experiences of evil which constitute, for some individuals, *prima facie* reason to doubt that their lives are great goods for them on the whole. I can also share her faith that God will ultimately integrate horrors into participants' lives in ways that make their existences, *ultima facie*, great goods for them on the whole. But I remain unconvinced that global goods are in principle incapable of providing such horror-defeating integration.

3.2 Reply Two: Justified Failures of Horror Defeat

RG tells us that horror-defeating requires agents to recognize and appropriate the overbalancing greater goods occasioned by their horror-participation. I have claimed that nothing in the nature of greater goods themselves would entail the failure of horror defeat. But, to now broaden the discussion, might there be justified reasons for the failure of horror defeat anyway (where again, I mean that in the sense stipulated by RG)? I will briefly consider four possible justifiers: damage, justice, freedom, and finitude. But let me be upfront about the limited scope of this discussion.

Adjudicating whether there are exceptions to RG will touch on several ongoing debates in philosophy of religion, all of which have now advanced to sufficiently

complicated states that general discussion will not yield many new insights. We will also brush up against issues more often situated in philosophical theology, such as the relations between God's grace, justice, and goodness. But I will try to focus here as much as possible on the narrower question: could there be reasons for the failure of universal horror defeat that are consistent with the nature, actions, and promises of God?

3.2.1 Possible Reason 1: Damages

Let me mention and then quickly dismiss one possible reason for the failure of horror defeat. Assume that God is objectively good to all horror participants in the right ways. Such goodness may not be recognized and enjoyed because of pre-mortem damages incurred by the horrors themselves. A consequence of horror participation may be deep psychological damage that includes a radical distortion or even the complete loss of an individual's good-recognizing capacity. If such cases are possible, then a failure to subjectively recognize the goodness of God to that individual in the context of his or her own life may be explained by a larger functional failure. But although intelligible, such a reason for failure is hardly justified. I think it *would* be inconsistent with the nature and promises of a loving and gracious God were horrors to remain undefeated solely because of incapacities brought about entirely by the horrors themselves.³⁵ And I suspect that some of our intuitive sense that horrors will not go undefeated by God comes from focusing on cases like this. But there are other possible reasons for horror-defeat, and they aren't so easily brushed aside.

3.2.2 Possible Reason 2: Divine Justice

Unfortunately, that is the only "easy" case. All of the others will threaten to spin quickly out of control. Recall that Adams' definition of horror participation applies

equally to both victims and perpetrators. And so, while the first possible reason sounded like a lame punishment of the victim, isn't there a better explanation available if a *perpetrator* of horrors like Stalin failed postmortem to recognize and enjoy God's horror-defeating goodness to them, namely as a just consequence of their culpability in horror-creation?

Adams replies in the negative, though her reasons are worth noting. Recall from section two that Adams thinks human vulnerability to horrors, *even to causing them*, shifts much of the responsibility for their actual occurrence beyond the intentions and capacities of participants. And so, even when we take Divine justice into account, Adams believes God's failure to heal the damaged perpetrator in ways that would prompt recognition and enjoyment would be unjustified. Her point isn't, of course, that the perpetrator bears no moral blame; rather, it is that horror defeating is such a great good that its deprivation would not be justified by the low degree of moral fault the perpetrator bears.

There's a lot going on in the background here. Adams argues that the evils of horrors outstrip our conventional moral frameworks: notions like guilt, blame, and innocence fail to adequately capture all that is evil about horrors.³⁶ She thinks older categories like shame and defilement are better suited for capturing the evils and redemption of horrors. More generally, Adams describes herself as a "skeptical realist" with respect to frameworks for normative evaluation, a kind of Hickean with respect to "The Good."³⁷ But Adams' own conclusions often rely on all-too-familiar conventional moral principles, as the present case illustrates. According to Adams, responsibility for causing horrors rests only in small part on the creature causing them because the

perpetrator's intent cannot match the outcome. As she puts it, "the fact that the consequences amplify far beyond their capacity to conceive and hence to intend...is not something for which humans are responsible" (CH 36).³⁸ Because intent and outcome are so mismatched in horrors, responsibility must lie elsewhere, ultimately on God. Put that way, it is clear that Adams relies on certain deontological principles to reject the possible justification of retributive justice in the failure of horror-defeat. I'm sympathetic, but of course not all theodicians share her anti-consequentialism, and so some traditional theodicians like Leibniz will have resources to resist her here. (Leibniz isn't alone; Susan Neiman has recently argued that the gaping disproportion between intent and consequence in cases of horrors challenges the deontic connection between culpability and intent, rather than providing reasons to shift the bulk of responsibility away from the perpetrators, as Adams would have it.³⁹)

In any case, Adams' embrace of deontological principles is understandable, even if controversial; less clear is why she insists that traditional moral frameworks are inadequate to account for the evils of horrors, while at the same time relying on one of those very frameworks to conclude that Divine goodness and justice could not adequately explain why some horrors remain undefeated.

3.2.3 Possible Reason 3: Creaturely freedom

If you thought all that went by too quickly, just wait. Since satisfying RG requires certain kinds of creaturely responses, it naturally invites pesky questions about creaturely freedom. And if that wasn't messy enough, since the sorts of responses envisioned by RG involve a kind of acknowledgement of God, there will also be parallels with ongoing

discussions about the plausibility and appropriateness of a populated hell. (Surely we can cover all this exhaustively in four pages!)

The last two cases tried to justify the failure of horror defeat based on *human* incapacities that were connected to the horrors themselves. Another reason horror defeat might fail is based on a *Divine* inability, as it were. Perhaps God cannot “coerce” free creatures to recognize, enjoy, and value the outweighing goods without destroying another, at least equally great good: creaturely freedom.⁴⁰ Consider: even if God is objectively good to each horror participant in the right ways, *must* every healed participant, or any other free creature for that matter, recognize, value, and enjoy that Divine goodness? Perhaps not; perhaps some creatures, even in the face of strong evidence for God’s abundant goodness to them, will freely refuse to see, acknowledge, and value it as such. What’s a good God to do?

How seriously we ought to worry about the possibility of such stubborn resisters in the face of Divine goodness depends on (a) the amount of goodness in uncoerced creaturely freedom and autonomy; (b) the ratio of the value of (a) to the value of universal horror defeat; and (c) what sorts of (and how much) Divine “coercion” are compatible with creaturely freedom. My own sympathies are in agreement with Adams’: (a) some; (b) pretty low; (c) quite a bit anyway. If those judgments are correct, God’s failure to defeat the evils for stubborn resisters in virtue of creaturely freedom will not seem like a promising justification.

Alas, not everyone agrees with Adams’ and my compatibilist leanings. What should the libertarian say here? [Warning: if you are a libertarian, you should probably distrust what I’m about to say. I’m guessing I will sound as silly to you as libertarians

often do to me when they discuss what compatibilists “should say” about cases.] To keep things manageable, let us suppose libertarians are committed to at least a rudimentary form of the Principle of Alternative Possibilities, such that an act is free only if the agent performing that act could have done otherwise.⁴¹ Now imagine our libertarian agent, call him Ivan, in the face of the indescribable beauty and goodness of God. Imagine God lovingly telling Ivan in great detail how at each stage of Ivan’s life, including the most horrific, God was present and actively bringing about incomparably wonderful goods for Ivan in virtue of those horrors – goods which God then lists off in more great detail. Perhaps this process, which Adams describes as “healing and coaching”⁴², takes quite a bit of time and resourcefulness on God’s part, but that eventually God presents Ivan with a very elegant and strong case for God’s objective goodness to Ivan, a case that is very similar to cases that have prompted countless others very similar to Ivan to recognize, enjoy, and value those goods. Perhaps God even uses His Molinist-vision™ camera to show Ivan a recording of *Ivan himself* in the possible world in which Ivan sees and freely acknowledges and values the goodness of God to him – a world in which Ivan appears indescribably complete and happy – as well as the possible world in which Ivan freely refuses to recognize and enjoy such goodness – a world in which Ivan appears to come to disastrously bad ends. Can we imagine, in the face of such strong reasons for saying “Yes to God,” Ivan still saying “Nah.”?

Well, if the satisfaction of RG requires acts of libertarian freedom, then it must remain metaphysically possible for Ivan to choose an alternative to affirming, valuing and enjoying the relevant goodness of God to him, no matter how overwhelmingly strong his reasons for accepting and valuing such goodness are. Possible – but at all likely?

Hardly, I would think. That Ivan would make such an alternative choice in the scenario above seems utterly mysterious to me. But, like my favorite libertarian Peter van Inwagen, I find much about libertarianism mysterious, so maybe there is nothing *newly* mysterious in an agent choosing against his overwhelming and clearly demonstrated best reasons and interests.

One could try to wiggle out of this a bit. The scenario I described presents Ivan as having very strong reasons for affirming God's goodness and almost no discernible reason for rejecting it. But maybe that's cheating, since whether Ivan takes himself to have such strong reasons may be dependent on a bunch of prior free actions that could prevent him from ever being in such a lopsided motivational state. Taking oneself to have a reason to act need not be dependent on a prior choice, I don't think [surely Descartes was wrong about that!], but it sometimes *can* be, can't it? However, I remain unconvinced that an infinitely powerful and creative being couldn't elicit whatever upstream choices are needed to get Ivan to a point where he at least takes himself to have pretty strong reasons to recognize and enjoy God's goodness. I sometimes can't get my young children to believe it is in their best interest to clean their room; while I'm trying to convince them, they decide to ignore me, or run away, or stubbornly refuse to acknowledge the validity of *modus ponens*. But my methods are quite limited [though I'm open for new suggestions here!]. I have a hard time imagining God, with unlimited time, patience, and resources to work with, becoming so similarly hamstrung by Ivan's tightly interwoven freedom and belief structure that He could never, just once, get Ivan to see that choosing God is in his best interest, even if it is always still possible for Ivan to refuse in the face of that interest.

A better wiggle may be to point out that Ivan's coming to see the overwhelming reasons favoring recognizing and enjoying God's goodness to him presupposes a kind of trust in the words and promises of God, a trust that a horror-strewn life might make practically impossible even in the beatific vision. Again, whether an initial lack of trust is something an infinitely creative, resourceful, and loving God can overcome without undermining freedom may depend on how much "healing and coaching" creaturely freedom can bear. I myself find it hard to believe that God couldn't get even extraordinarily damaged persons to eventually trust Him enough to listen to His words – even if that took a very, very long time and lots of "Divine embraces," as it were. But I suspect others will come to different conclusions here.

So libertarians may have reasons to resist Adams here, depending on their brand of libertarianism. I'm less open-minded on the questions of value ((a) and (b)). Assume that God has been good to Ivan in an objectively horror-defeating way and that it would be a transcendent good *for Ivan* to recognize and value the horror-defeating goods. Suppose also that Ivan remains stubbornly resistant via his freedom to God's numerous and creative overtures. And suppose God knows (or, for the Opens among us, comes to believe with extremely high certainty) that the only way in which Ivan will come to recognize, value, and enjoy God's goodness to him is if God overrides his libertarian freedom. Something of value will be sacrificed, but of relatively how much? Is it really better that Ivan continues to suffer, believing God has despised and cursed him, freely indulging his worst tendencies in ways that exclude the presence of God in his post-mortem existence than that God lovingly embrace Ivan and gift him with new eyes attuned to see God's goodness and a new steadfast will that forever seeks out God's

never-ending presence? I don't think it would be better. Certainly in my own case, if there is some future timeslice of me contemplating the yawning abyss of Hell and holding out against God's appeals to come and taste His bounty, I pray now to God of that future self: "Determine me!" But, again, what do I know – I'm a compatibilist already and think that's pretty much what it takes to break through the grip of sin on me with grace in the first place.

Here's maybe a better way of pursuing this question (though the set-up is controversial): *for whom* is it better that Ivan remains freely resistant to recognizing and valuing God's horror-defeating goodness? Is it better for Ivan? Surely not, at least on any normal harms/benefit analysis I can think of. Is it better, perhaps, for God? I've heard people talk this way: "uncoerced" expressions of free love and affection by persons are more valuable to and cherished by God than coerced responses. Suppose so. I remain hopeful that in such cases, God will accept the lesser good for Himself – "coerced" recognition of goodness – for the sake of the greater good for His creature – a place at the eternal banquet. I hope this not because I think God must or even ought to take the value hit; but because God has shown already that His love prompts and bears tremendous Divine self-sacrifice.

3.2.4 Possible Reason Four: Goods Beyond our Ken

Adams is unmoved by appeals to the importance and value of preserving creaturely autonomy in Divine horror-defeat in part because she thinks such appeals misconstrue the Creator/creature relation.⁴³ To use the parent/child analogy, humans are portrayed as having the stature before God that, roughly, teenagers have before their parents. Though teenagers lack the full resources, abilities, and responsibilities of their

parents, they nonetheless enjoy a measure of independence and autonomy that would be unduly crushed if parents overly interfered and did not afford them the space to develop their own identities and to experience many, even if not all, of the consequences of their actions. Adams thinks that analogy severely underestimates the gap between God and creatures, which she calls an ontological “size-gap.” Instead of teenagers, creatures before God are more like two-year olds before parents.⁴⁴ We have less need for autonomous space to discover ourselves than for someone willing to change our messy diapers and repay our tantrums with firm, embracing love. As she colorfully puts it, “If this should mean God’s causally determining some things to prevent everlasting ruin, I see this as no more an insult to our dignity than a mother’s changing a baby’s diaper is to the baby.”⁴⁵

I share much of Adams’ theological anthropology (and corresponding high Christology). But this very size gap raises the greatest friendly challenge to RG. Given the size gap, which includes cognitive and emotional dimensions, it seems quite possible that God’s reasons and methods for weaving goods into the fabric of horror participants lives are forever beyond their grasp, analogous to the way my own two year cannot understand why her parents give her bitter medicine, though she can grasp and trust that it is driven by love for her. (Here we brush up against skeptical theism that extends into the afterlife.) Given the size-gap, we have good reason to think that it is at least *possible* that some human persons will be forever unable to know the specific greater goods that their suffering has occasioned. Such recognition failure would not be due to God’s refusal to condescend to us with explanation. But, nonetheless, RG would not be satisfied.

Would failure for this reason represent the failure of universal horror defeat? Not necessarily, in which case RG doesn't state a necessary condition for solving the problem of horrendous evil. The primary concern about horrors is the existence of persons who have *prima facie* reason to doubt that their lives have been great goods to them on the whole. Adams has cogently argued that defeating this *prima facie* reason requires participants themselves to come to believe that their lives are, in fact, great goods for them on the whole (which presupposes God's having been objectively being good to them in certain ways). But why must forming *that* defeater belief require the recognition and enjoyment of any of the particular goods that God has used to objectively defeat the evils of horrors? *One* way to come to believe that my life is a great good to me would be to come to recognize and enjoy the greater goods that God has used to outweigh the evils within the context of my life. But surely there are alternative paths to acquiring such a belief! Why think the conditions of RG state the *only* way to come to such a belief in the great goodness of one's life, even when it contains horrors?

Here is another experience that can serve as the basis for defeating *prima facie* reasons to doubt the great good of my existence: being told by a present, infinitely good and loving God *that God has been objectively good to me in ways that make my life a great good to me on the whole*. That is, why couldn't participants come to believe that God has been objectively great to them without seeing the particular greater goods involved? Establishing the trust needed to find Divine reassurances convincing may require long stretches of sweet intimacy not found this side of Heaven for horror participants. But I fail to see why it also requires the sort of recognition and enjoyment described in RG. That should come as good news since, I've suggested in this section, it

seems quite possible that even if God wanted to let us in on the details of His objective goodness to us, He couldn't, given what Adams herself believes to be our toddler-like relation to His providence.

3.3 The Real Motivation for RG: The Nature of Human Persons

Suppose the universal satisfaction of RG was not necessary for all persons coming to believe that their lives were great goods for them on the whole. Why would Adams still insist, as I think she would, that God may nonetheless defeat horrors in ways that satisfy RG (at least to the extent to which God can)? What is behind her preference for RG in the first place?

Adams explicitly denies that fulfilling RG is necessary for God in virtue of God's good nature.⁴⁶ Nor is God in any way obliged to defeat horrors, since God does not incur any moral obligations to creatures in the first place, according to Adams.⁴⁷ Instead, Adams claims that universal horror-defeat à la RG is "conditionally necessary, given God's love for material creation and given God's love for human being(s)."⁴⁸ Fair enough, but why should God's love for creation and human beings take the specific form of horror-defeat prescribed by RG? Adams' most telling answer is that God *values* a certain capacity of human persons, one that is threatened by horror participation and so is to be rescued in horror defeat.⁴⁹ What is this human capacity?

Adams appeals to what she calls an "existentialist" view of human persons: "I am committed to the existentialist assumption that meaning-making is an essential and distinctive function of persons."⁵⁰ She adds later, "I take a page from Tillich and other neo-orthodox twentieth-century theologians to contend that *meaning* is the issue and *horrors* are the problem." The problem of meaning is what God needs to defeat (as

opposed to the problem of sin or of death), and horrors are the sorts of events that threaten to render lives meaningless. “On my conception, horrors afflict persons insofar as they are actual or potential meaning-makers,” participation in which threatens one’s ability to “make positive sense of his or her existence later on.”⁵¹ Since horrors threaten the ability to make positive sense of one’s life, defeating them takes the form of restoring the capacity to make meaningful sense of one’s pre-mortem existence. And that, Adams thinks, is why the participants themselves need to recognize and value the overbalancing goods God has provided for them. If God were to be only objectively good to them, without also enabling them to see and value some of the specific ways the evils of horrors were partly constitutive of the great good of their lives, the suffering would remain, to them, mysterious and incomprehensible – in which case the real problem of horrendous evils would remain unsolved.

In a way, this brings us back full circle to where we began. Adams and theodicy critics like Levinas end up agreeing that horrific evils like the Holocaust most threaten to undermine participants’ abilities to make sense of their lives, the world, and God. Older theodicies relied on *global* goods in order to show how evils are explicable within a good and just Divine economy; both Adams and theodicy critics deem such goods inadequate to explain and defeat horrors. Here, the two sides part company. Levinas and others conclude: so much the worse for *all* theodicies (traditional or their secular Enlightenment counterparts). Adams concludes: so much the worse for global goods theodicies, though other resources of the Christian tradition, such as Chalcedonian Christology, can restore meaning to horrors and hence meaningfulness to participants. In a sense, all *three* sides – Adams, 17th century rationalists, and Levinas – agree that what is fundamentally

threatened by evil, particularly horrific evils, is our need to have our lives and the world make sense and to understand the reasons these evils happen. It is the *prima facie* senselessness, “uselessness” in Levinas’ terminology, of horrendous evils that a good God needs to defeat in order for our lives to be great goods for us after all. The three groups simply disagree on what, if anything, God could provide to overcome the threat from this inexplicability and apparent senselessness.

I don’t have anything in the way of a knock-down proof against this understanding of the human predicament. But I will close by registering my own dissatisfaction on this point of common agreement. I don’t think the search for meaning or explanation is what the beatific vision will most fundamentally satisfy, in part because some of those same existentialists that Adams uses have convinced me that our searches for *meaning* are born out of the prior failures of institutions, practices, and relationships, a brokenness which I take to be neither optimal nor ultimate. I too look forward to that great day when we no longer need explanation, though not because we have at last received it and are satisfied, but because we no longer have the need for it at all as we rest in the Divine presence.

Like Adams, I find the Biblical portrayal of Job the most illuminating for what is at stake in horrific suffering.⁵² And I too see in Job’s ultimate confession of satisfaction in God a reason for hope for the rest of us. But I don’t see that God’s solution to Job involves anything like RG – which is all the more striking if we take seriously the narrative bookends that try to provide just such a recognizable greater good for Job’s plight: Divine one-upsmanship. Nor do I understand Job’s problem to be one of *prima facie* meaninglessness, though his earlier statement that his life has not been a great good

to him is indeed a symptom of a deeper problem. Instead, I see Job's problem as his inability to *trust* any longer in God's providential goodness to him.⁵³ "Oh, that I were as in months past, as in the days when God watched over me...when the Almighty was yet with me," he laments. Now, his soul is "poured out," his "dignity driven away as by the wind," his "safety vanishing like a cloud", his bones "pierced by night" and "gnawing pains." So he cries out, "You have become cruel to me, with the strength of your hand, you persecute me." Job has lost trust that the great and powerful God of the universe is on his side and is good to him.

And it is this lack of trust, not a purported need for meaning and explanation, that God addresses in the Divine speeches. God does not name for Job *any* of the greater goods God has brought about for Job in virtue of Job's horrors. God instead reminds Job of how good His providence has been to so many other creatures, from the mighty Behemoth to the silly ostrich. Something in that reply defeats Job's problem, for Job answers that God's purposes are "never thwarted," though they involve "things too wonderful" for him to understand, before he then forswears his untrusting ways. What in that engagement with God restores Job's trust in God's providential goodness and, indirectly we may imagine, his belief that his life is a great good for him on the whole? As Job tells it, it isn't his coming to recognize and enjoy greater goods; in fact, it isn't really anything that God conveys propositionally at all, since Job admits, he had already heard much of what God conveys before. Rather, it is something about the Divine *presence* that proves sufficient for trust, even though Divine *purpose* is not revealed. "My ears had heard of you," Job confesses in satisfaction, "but now my eyes have seen you."⁵⁴

Will *we* ever be in a position to recognize, enjoy, and value the greater goods that God has brought about in our lives in virtue of God's great love for each of us? I don't hold out any hope for this, but neither do I think our eternal ignorance on this score would represent a failure to solve the problem of horrors. But will we all ever be in a position to recognize, enjoy, value and trust the goodness of God that, we are lovingly assured, has objectively guaranteed the great goodness of our lives for each of us? *That* is certainly among my hopes and prayers.

¹ I talk about this point elsewhere. Hey, wait, didn't I tell you not to read these things?!

² I talk about this elsewhere too. [What's the correct word here: Theodicians? Theodicists? Something else?]

³ Neiman attempts to show why the horrors of Nazi concentration camps in some sense outstripped the horrors of previous mass evils, including 17th century religious wars (see esp. Neiman, pp. 238 *ff*). But much of her case rests on factors outside the horrors themselves, such as its occurrence by a leading industrial Western nation steeped in Enlightenment ideals in an era of optimistic progressivism.

⁴ For more on this distinction (which I find more helpful than Plantinga's theodicy/defense distinction), see Adams CH 42-44

⁵ "Useless Suffering," 377

⁶ Tilley, *The Evils of Theodicy*, 3 (emphasis original)

⁷ *Violence*, 180 (emphasis mine)

⁸ I am reminded of Peter van Inwagen's claim that even Alexander Pope, whose views on evil are among the hardest to take seriously, is guilty of a grave intellectual error, but ought not be charged with moral failure as well ("The Argument from Evil," 58; see also Adams' version of this claim in HE 186-191). Of course, were one's intellectual views on evil to lead to engage in immoral practices, we would be in different territory. And I suppose Zozek and others might believe that even voicing grave intellectual errors can itself be an immoral practice, in the way that denying the scope of the Holocaust can count as more than simply a colossally incorrect historical judgment. But I also think that uttering a best-of-all-possible-worlds theory and asking how well or poorly it fares with respect to events like the Holocaust in an academic conference setting has far different motivations and moral standing than Holocaust denying in the political sphere.

⁹ HE 26

¹⁰ HE 26

¹¹ CH 36-7

¹² CE 38-9; CH 36

¹³ Cf. 29: "two dimensions of Divine goodness in relation to creation – namely, 'producer of global goods' and 'goodness to or love of individual created persons'". Note that if global goods are instead defined as goods whose goodness accrues *only* to the world as a whole, we should immediately grant the conclusion of Adams' critique, but note that it is a hollow victory, since no theodicy offers global goods, so defined, as the basis for explaining God's goodness in creating and sustaining our world.

¹⁴ CH 45

¹⁵ *Brothers Karamazov*, 244 (Pevear translation)

¹⁶ CH 45 (emphasis original)

¹⁷ HE 20-21; CH 45-46.

¹⁸ CH 47

¹⁹ This "thought" will be challenged in section 3.2.4 below.

²⁰ HE 82

²¹ HE 81, emphasis mine

²² HE 145-6

²³ This formula is mine, not Adams', and so complaints about it should fall on me. Adams sometimes writes as though something like RG is a *sufficient* condition for horror-defeat (HE 168), but usually presents it as just a necessary condition (e.g. HE 82).

²⁴ The problems of horrendous evils for theism, according to Adams, involve threatening to overwhelm and render barren the central human capacity of "meaning-making"; this is discussed in section 3.3 below.

²⁵ Adams readily admits that our cognitive limitations and God's surpassing love make us unable to articulate how, for each participant, God will *in fact* satisfy RG (Ref). She is content to show, using the resources of Christian theology, how God *could* do so, something she thinks global goods theodicies can't even do. I do not know whether she would extend RG to cover cases of non-horrendous evil, but perhaps the thought is that if horrendous evils can be defeated in line with RG, surely lesser evils can be as well.

²⁶ HE 157

²⁷ HE 55

²⁸ That isn't to say that the goods associated with reliable predictive abilities couldn't be had in other ways, such as is would be had by inhabitants of worlds in which crystal ball gazing works. But that isn't required to show that global goods can also be goods-for individuals; the concern about alternative ways of getting the same goods has more to do with clause (iii), to be discussed below.

²⁹ Leibniz admits that his preferred global goods may mean that some individuals live sub-optimal lives. But the charge from horrendous evils isn't that one's life couldn't have been better; it is that it wasn't good at all. Surely proving that my life is a great good for me doesn't require showing that it couldn't have been better – talk about making the perfect enemy of the good!

³⁰ Such assumptions are called into question in section 3.24 below.

³¹ See, for instance, the recent critics of traditional theodicies.

³² HE 166 ff.

³³ There's also a looming *tu quoque* here. After all, Adams herself thinks that the (seemingly *global*) good of a material world makes possible, perhaps even likely, the fact that some creatures will be exposed to horrific suffering. Presumably such a good would be, in her language, "organically" connected to specific horrendous evils. I don't see why other global goods could not be similarly tied to particular, non-generic events.

³⁴ Leibniz's theodicy has the resources to deny even this charge, but that requires granting his theses of world-bound individuals.

³⁵ A weaker possibility is that it would represent only an inexplicable failure, where some inexplicable failures are neither justified nor unjustified. This seems to be the view of some skeptical theists about some putative reasons for evil; there is no discernible reason for their occurrence, but that does not entail that there is no justifiable reason (nor that there is a justifiable reason). In the present case, though, I think we have enough moral knowledge to see that God, bearing a fair amount of responsibility for horror-participation in the first place, would in fact be unjustified if God failed to redeem horrific suffering simply because of the horror itself. That seems analogous to the injustice of being largely responsible for a person dyeing their hair red and then refusing to associate with them solely in virtue of their new hair color.

³⁶ CH ____; HE 192

³⁷ Ref (Faith and Philosophy article)

³⁸ CH 36; see also HE ____

³⁹ Neiman (267-281). Neiman doesn't, so far as I know, ever engage Adams' work explicitly.

⁴⁰ There has to be a more neutral term than "coerce," but I can't think of one. [Can you? Wait – why are you still reading these?! Shameful.] In any case, since I'm pro-"coerce" anyway, I shouldn't be charged with stacking the deck with my terminology here.

⁴¹ Footnote reference to hundreds of articles and books on this point.

⁴² CH 48

⁴³ HE 157

⁴⁴ HE 49; 103-5

⁴⁵ HE 157

⁴⁶ CH 213

⁴⁷ CH 43. Even the Biblical portrayal of Divine covenant-making and keeping are not intended to portray any moral obligations, even self-imposed ones, on the part of God, according to Adams (HE 96-7).

⁴⁸ CH 213

⁴⁹ HE 31, emphasis original. See also HE 30-31: “A cosmic creator and/or governor who operated with such reasons alone would not thereby be one who placed a high value on human personhood in general or individual human persons in particular.” She sometimes uses a more Kantian-sounding motivation that God would not “respect” persons or personhood if God did not defeat horrors in this way (HE 163), but that sounds like a claim which presupposes respect-worthiness and an obligation to respect persons, something Adams seems reluctant to affirm for God-creature relations.

⁵⁰ CH 195; HE 46

⁵¹ HE 28

⁵² CH 32

⁵³ I don’t know how to settle this disagreement. Does the lack of trust prompt despair about meaninglessness, or does the threat of meaninglessness prompt the lack of trust?

⁵⁴ Job 42:2-6